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A
House of Words

By Clifford Bax

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A House of Words

CLIFFORD BAX

OXFORD
BASIL BLACKWELL

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PR 6003
A95 H6

To PHYLLIS REID.

WRITER TO READER.

HERE is a house of words
Built for the maker's mind.

Enter: and, if you will, stay with me long.

But, if you like it not,

Go with good grace. The man

Who builds his own house builds to please himself.

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THREE of these poems have appeared in "*To-Day*" and are republished by the courtesy of the Editor.

AVE.

FAIR, far-off spirit who some day, being born,
Shall meet, with senses never-used, the shock
Of air and light and sound, and be afraid,—
I, long familiar now with life and men
And having found in both more good than ill,
Send you all hail and welcome, and account
Of this bewildering world beyond the womb.

You will be glad to see how rich a sky
Roofs the world in,—whether it show the sun
Blazoned upon a blue field, or be throng'd
With architecture conjured by the wind,
Or hung with glittering hieroglyphs of night :
And not less glad to find the huge old sea
That, having for so long kept man at bay,
Lies now subjected and—as though still sore
And hurt by memory—mourns toward the stars,
A blinded Polypheme : and, most of all,
You will rejoice to find around you here
That pageant of phantasmagoric shapes

Which the profound, poetic mind of earth
Imagined and contrived,—the mountain-chains
That spoke in form the anguish of her prime,
The rivers that she willed should vein the world,
Green fantasy of forests, glowing joy
Made manifest on patterned fur or wing,
And, uttered from the tenderest of her moods,
The elfin artistry of shell and flower.

Here, too, in this old city-lichened world
Is measureless beauty that was made by men.
Whoever looks thereon with open sight
May keep his spirit, from boyhood on to death,
Burnished with joy, and in immortal youth.
So much those others left, so much endures,
That we, late-coming, lack the eyes wherewith
To spend our fortune. Here, in East or West,
Are temples that were solid thoughts, and built
And splendoured in the likeness of their souls;
And great wing'd gods, and running fauns and nymphs,
Out of their worship or their gladness hewn;
And music,—flowing chains of happy sound,
Or such as while you hear may stir again
Memory of those bright deeps wherein you now
Soar without lapse: and all our books that wait

Like fabulous caverns for your entering in,—
The sacred poems that one mind could yield
And one mind only; tales that men have dreamed;
And that wild myriad-coloured torchlit tale
Of human deeds and hopes; and golden books
That, wavering in the winds of birth and death,
Are little candles lighted by man's wit
And held forth to the universal dark.

And what of men themselves? and what to say
Of those that for so long shall be your kin?
The best shall make you proud; the worst, ashamed:
The motley most are foolish and are kind.
Some few love beauty still, and fewer truth,
But, high or low, the rest—with hooded minds
Hurrying through marvels, pausing not to spell
The visible mind of God in heaven and earth,
Not wondering at this world nor at themselves,
Nor picturing what the life of man might be,
Scatter and waste their force in woven guile
Or fang'd contention, whether of war or peace,
And no more wise for twice ten thousand years
Live discontented still, and still unjust.

How shall you fare among them? Shall you be
A spirit foreign or native to mankind?

Although I see how those are happiest here
That most resemble others, not for you
Can I desire that poor plebeian ease.
Life has enough of good for any man,
And you shall find it so. A clear-eyed babe,
You shall regard our unfamiliar scene
With whispering memories of that other state
Which never quite shall cease: and then, a boy,
Rouse up with zest to pit your strength and will
In that old tourney, that enthralling game—
Ambition—which the stars, had they but eyes,
Would surely smile to watch: and in your time
You, not yet even housed within the womb,
Shall come on love, and there perhaps be hurt,
But, hurt or no, upon that troublous tree
Find a sure fruit of joy, and joy so full
That none of all that lived could speak it out.

Spirit unborn, whatever fate be yours,
You shall be happy here on earth, as I,
If, not quite merging with the loud stream of things,
You hold your inner self a little back;
For then that vestal, ever-burning lamp
Which is the sense of wonder at ourselves
And of some mystery looming through the world,

Shall never fade, nor leave you with dead eyes
And lost in life. Indeed, if that endure
Steadily through the din and press of years,
To you it shall be like the upper air
Sent to a diver fathoms undersea,
Holding you still in part where now you dwell
And closer to the dreaming Spirit whose dream
Is time and space and all the labouring worlds.

PERSONALITIES.

DOCTOR.

(H. G. B.)

COLOSSAL doctor, friend of the world, companion
Desired of the sage or fool with equal fervour,—
Because we have lived our April-time together
Receive (and with ten years' love) my homage also !

Most men measure their draught of life in a thimble ;
You, in a beaker : and, many-armed as an idol,
You take for your own, not this nor that, but all things—
Art, philosophy, music, reform or science.

You made me prouder of man, at last revealing
A full-sailed life superbly voyaging forward.
Long and well have I known you, and yet I know not
Now if your joy be most of body or spirit :

Whether you more rejoice to master a mountain
From crag to crag ; or flourish a fly ; or, striking
Athwart the rampant billow, pursue a sunfish ;
Or troll some fragrant ditty of rural England ;

Or hunt down truth in a forest of metaphysics :
Or heal the hurt of a friend ; or find, on a sudden,
The four-leafed phrase and the verse like a swallow curving,—
For body and spirit in you are of equipollence,

As well know we who, happy just to be near you,
Have talked and smoked and laughed through many a midnight,
Grudging our sleep ; and beheld, above your fireplace,
The skyblue blades that humbled the men of Harvard.

SCHOLAR.

• (B. G.)

SHOULD the world in its old myopia,
Caught from the dust of the mere immediate,
Never applaud the bubbles of beauty or
Granite thoughts that I carve or blow for it ;
Nay, nor care though with well-trimmed scholarship
You, descending profound antiquity,
Open the mouth of the Past, and speak for the
Mute majestic Egyptian dynasties,—
Let us not rail at the raucous multitude.

Rather let us, O best and kindest,
Each make up as a stage philosopher :
Let us retire to an island hushed by the
Hot Pacific, an unknown indolent
Island, where in the fruits and foliage
Dwell but ignorant birds and butterflies ;
There to bask in the shadows, meditate
God and the soul or perhaps, remembering
Less of our calm than the world's ingratitude,
Share the bananas and then, dejectedly,
Shy the skins at the birds-of-paradise.

FLIRT.

(V. R.)

MYRIAD-LOVERED

Vain, provocative,
Heartless, honeyed
Exquisite girl,
Are you not merely
Something enchanted ?
Could we unspell you,
What should we find ?

What but a languid,
Glittering-feathered,
Long-tailed, fabulous
Bird-of-paradise,
Floating (with downcast
Eyes on her image)
Under a five-mooned
Emerald heaven
Out in the tropics
Of elfin-land ?

MUSICIAN.

(A. B.)

MANY know you now by virtue of that music
Known to me, and loved, since you and I were boys,—
Music like heard fire, or hazed with unrelinquished
Adolescent dreams of more than man may find :
I alone, or I and three or four, remember
How, in earlier years when none acclaimed your skill,
Shadowed in the morn by sycamore and chestnut,
Many a summer through our triple wicket stood ;
How we pegged the net before the trees had budded ;
How we played when leaves were blown across the pitch ;
How we drove the ball far out amidst the orchard,
Up the strawberry beds or through the gardener's glass.
We alone—and one, perhaps, who fell in battle—
Still can see with you the games that lengthened out
Even until at last the bowler, dim with twilight,
Hit the bails, and won : and we, alone, recall

How we gathered after round the noisy tea-cups,
Tired and glad and young, and knew the world was good.
Good it was indeed, for none of us had sorrowed,
None so much as feared to hurt another's life :
Yet though all is changed, and gone the gracious garden,
Gone the scarless mind of many-troubled youth,
Count me not with those that whine for what is over,—
All that once was good is good for evermore ;
All we had of joy endures, a joy within us ;
All the rest of life is lovelier for those years.

BIBLIOPHILE.

(R. L. H.)

AS you would leave the highway, and crossing clovered
meadows,

Rejoice to find a beamed and many-mullioned farm,
So I rejoice, my dreamer, to hear your silver English
Ring through the nickel speech of this uncourtly age.

In you, that laugh or labour as though before your lintel
Elizabethan scholars any day might dismount,
How much forsaken wisdom, what unfrequented poems,
Find one whose heart and brain are quick to love them still!

Could I be sure as they are of one such peerless reader
I should be well-contented,—could I but know that you,
When the world's face has altered, should taste my antique
verses

Beside a pear-tree'd wall or willow'd country stream.

But who dares hope as proudly? The life distilled within them
No latter You shall prize after five hundred years.
With every generation the minds that muse grow fewer—
Like the strong gracious homes that Tudor masons built.

Well, let my hard-wrought verses endure or perish ! Better
To have you here, fit friend for bright or dusky mood—
Half vellum-fingering hermit and half superb Hidalgo—
Than store for them the love which now you give to me :

Better have heard in Venice the gorgeous dreams that buoyed
you,

Cricketed with you once through days of August heat,
Known of your moonlight farings by English lanes, and with you
Watched, as we grew, the slow patterns of fate unfold.

ACTOR.

(R. F.)

WHAT though, as once you told me in the firelight,
Sorrow and disgrace were the lees of your love-cup?
Nothing care I though the righteous may arraign you,
Since in you lingers all the world's youth.

All the proud past you bring me, as a perfume
Floating from an attar of roses that perished
Long before Europe, howling at her splendour,
Nailed Aphrodite fast on the Cross.

Glittering-minded Roman of the downfall,
Mandarin astray in the streets of the present,
You and your dwelling, exquisitely heathen,
Give to our own time fragrance and fire;

Wherefore my words, like ivory insculpted,
Come that you may know how I cherish your gargoyled
Intricate speech and convoluted fancies,—
Dear many-masked inscrutable man!

SAINT.

(F. H. C.)

YOU, a born darling who snap your fingers at life
And laugh at the worst of woes, your own or ours,
Ought, in a careworn age, to be held as high
In honour as ever the pallid saint of the past.

Better for us than the saint an hundredfold
You, a Venetian glass of rekindling wine,
You of the swift sweet look and the tawny curls,
The vast sombrero, the blue cloak and the silk hose.

MYSTIC.

(F. E.)

STRANGE to life,
You lived in a dream.
Out of your dream
Did you wake to life?

While you were here
Your thoughts went there :
Now, being there,—
Sage old friend,
Remember us here !

MISCELLANEOUS.

MEMORY.

WALKING by windy trees
And hearing that hoary sound
(For older than man himself
Is the sound of windy trees)
On a sudden—like that dread
Fall from the edge of sleep—
I felt the present collapse
And time swallowing time,
And I was a man far back
In the virgin green of the earth.

There, by the windy trees,
For a moment full as a day
I saw the world outspread
Like toys on the floor, and moved
At will through a thousand years
And all the cities of old :
And once could hear, in a lull,
As though the door were ajar,
Voices of men who talked
In the streets of Athens and Rome.

Was it a sleight of the brain,—
A trick of the windy trees?
The rest may judge as they will,
For he that has known, as I,
This tidal wave of the soul,
Knows that eternal change—
Though it burn up worlds and suns—
May neither consume nor cloud
The diamond spirit in man.

UNBUILDING.

WHILE you played and our fair companion listened,
I, in the fluttering firelight, all of a sudden
Felt, as I mused, how much
Marvellous life

Slumbered there in the antique room around us.

Once the rafters under the roof, up-towering
Spread their leaves to Elizabethan summers.

Who was it brought them here?

Men who perhaps

Heard with terror news of the great Armada.

When men carved the chairs and the long low table?
Even the walls were quarried; and once the carpet

Must have been wrought by girls,

Happy or sad,

Kneeling close to a loom in bygone Persia.

So, no less, in the fire I hear the boisterous
Hardly human life of the modern miner;

See, if I lift my head,

Glimmering glass,

Twilight-blue,—the familiar wonder of windows.

Whatsoever I look on bears my fancy
Back to the time and place of its own beginning,—
 Further and further back
 Into the past,
Into the primal world of the swamp and forest.

All the past is about me. Suns and planets
Linger yet in a chair, a book or a garment.
 Even the silent girl
 Near to me now
Holds the story of all mankind within her.

Travelling down the centuries, like an heirloom,
Still her beauty endures,—the slender body,
 Wrought of a thousand loves,
 Bearing it on
Scatheless out of the smoke of tumbled empires.

D. G. ROSSETTI.

WHEN, as light failed, you put your brushes down,
In those first years of young and ardent will,
Often, I do not doubt, you tarried still
To dream that in a red-walled Tuscan town
With some great friend of then unreaped renown
You worked, oblivious though the church grew chill
And sworn to leave well done the citted hill,
The haloed head or flower-besprinkled gown.

As then such dreams of some old painter stirred
Half-sad delight within your kingly heart,
So, Dante Gabriel, I now—undeterred
By fools and fashion—think, half-sadly too,
Had life not launched us fifty years apart
I had been young, had shared my best, with you !

EXCAVATION.

IF I should meet with the boy that I was,
How should we look ?
What could we say ?
So have I changed in the years that I think
Both would be dumb.

Yet there is nothing that came from without,—
Nothing of new
Built on the old.
What I am now was asleep in me then,
Waiting its hour.

Slowly, as men that unbury a vast
City that lay
Sunken in sand,
Thought and the powerful spades of the world
Dig out the self.

MAKING LAND.

SNARE me anew, dear net of woman's beauty . . .
I am too early free.

Twice hurt, I come again, eager for capture
While yet I may be snared.

Well do I know your joy, your disillusion . . .
Well do I know how soon
My own eternal spirit shall rule me wholly,
And all your charm be vain.

IN STYGIAN CAVE.

WRECKED or ruined, every one,
Lie the temples of the sun ;
Still, lampless, overstrewn,
The strange temples of the moon ;
Nor shall bright feet evermore
Fleck the planet-pictured floor . . .
What should I do here to-day ?
The world I want has flowed away.

THE DREAMER.

UNDER a bridge of stone the river shuddered by.
Grey were the Wiltshire fields, and grey the rushing sky.

And while I stood in thought the wind of vision came.
It blew the whole wild world out like a candle-flame.

I saw God gazing down like someone lost in dream.
Motionlessly he watched an ever-moving stream.

Under a bridge of stone, the bridge he leaned upon,
Time and the universe were idly eddying on.

THE SCALES.

WHAT, O Man, shall God remember when the world of
men is cold?

All the anguish, all the violence, that have wracked it from of
old?

Be you not too sure; for haply when the troublers yet to come,
Like the dreaded Roman legions or the Tartar hordes, are dumb,

God shall see an ancient hill-top where an unremembered boy
Laughed because the earth was lovely and to live and breathe
was joy.

IN THE COTSWOLDS.

WHEN, below that brooding heaven, along the rich
deserted roads

I and she, my secret lover, came where Bibury lay—
Roof and mullion, wall and gable, once by Morris known and
loved—

Life became for us a happy half-remote romance.

Hard at hand we saw the mill-house, dreamlike as a nursery
rhyme,

Bowered amid the water-mirrored sadly-moving trees—
Maples ardent like her senses, delicate aspens like her soul.

What a gracious hour of life to bear away through death !

A BERKSHIRE HOLIDAY.

BEFORE the spring had flowered away full summer burst
in middle May ;

The homestead walls began to glow ; the garden soil grew hot.
And we—how light of heart were we, foregathered round a
crusted tree

Whose boughs had cooled the grass below in summers long
forgot.

He whose goodwill convened us there was not grown thin with
fast and prayer,

And, princely-handed, round of face, with eye of choleric blue,
He would not squander scanty breath in arguing of the soul
and death,—

Nay, when of these we talked a space he wonderingly with-
drew.

The young musician, pipe in hand, lay thinking out a work he
planned.

Between them, tilting back his chair and speaking well, was
one

Who lived by law but gave his heart to ancient Greek and
Tuscan art

And thought the world had nothing fair left in it but the sun.

Our life, he said, was pinched and dry "as oranges in late July.
How would our decorous joy compare with what was once
on earth ?

And could they know how time has wrought, what had the great
Athenians thought

When beauty was the natural air that all men breathed at
birth ?

"In Persia, too, men once were skilled to make life rich as
fancy willed :

Fair as a tale in verse it flowed in China's golden days :
And here in England men could find once, ere the world grew
sick of mind,

A gracious varied green abode, a life to love and praise."

So for a while we talked and then, remembering that the world
of men

Is goodly still, for all its woe, and summertime too short,
Rose up, took racquets, left the shade, flung to the grass our
coats and played,

Driving the white balls hard and low about the sunlit court.

Good was it thus to feel the tense delight of old in every sense ;
Good when the count of games ran ill to draw close up and
win ;

Or in a lull to see on high the swallows fleck the violet sky,
And far along the wooded hill the flush of eve begin,

Until at last, with tired content, back by the flowery paths we
went.

Round the laburnum hovered yet the bees upon their way.
And while through windows opened wide a new-made music
flowed outside,

I and our Jacques, listening, set the chessmen out for play.

And long, with plan and counter-plan, there strove until, as
dusk began,

The early stars, all tremulous, like dew came unperceived,
And sent us in at fall of night to supper and warm candle-light
And tales that good Herodotus himself had not believed.

And which is lovelier, night or day, when summer starts in
middle May?

Perhaps, indeed, the cloudless night when, first remote and
small,

The stars begin to seem so near that, shuddering back in panic
fear,

The gazer feels that in mid-flight the spinning earth may fall.

And there, as midnight overhead her old unaltered beauty
spread

And moths about us came to pause with tender wings upfurled,
A voice flowed on in pleasant tone praising all times except
our own,

And, half asleep, with soft applause, we let it rend the world.

STEPHEN PHILLIPS.

HARDLY perceived, forth from the world now you pass,
Poet, who stood once in a wild glare of praise
When, at a stroke of your mind, again in our gibbering theatre
Sounded the true accent of man—eloquent verse.

Not, with the crowd, following the last pounded drum,
I, if alone, honour you still, I who then
Drained with the ardour of boyhood wine that was mightier
than Circe's,
Wine that could turn men for an hour back into gods.

FALERNIAN.

PASSION strives up to some imagined peak—
To years of bliss or one hour's full delight :
The love of man for man
Aims at no topmost mark.

That bee-like ecstasy which I once desired,
Now I desire no more. I see that life
Brings her best vintage last—
The love of man for man.

FORESIGHT.

RED with a wintry haze, high over Trafalgar Square,
The old unworshipped sun looked at me, eye to eye :
And, suddenly swept with wonder, I wanted a life at odds
Not only with all my countrymen but with my place in time.

I wanted a temple, built that earth might honour the sun ;
To stand on the petalled steps with a flower-crowned happy
throng ;
To watch the golden-garmented litany-chanting priests
And, rayed with gorgeous plumage, the beautiful sacred girls.

Hurrying men—set free for an hour, as I, from toil,
And drugged with the dream of the present—passed me, and
knew no whit
How strange was one in their midst nor how he had felt, with
grief,
The foreign blood of poetry flowing along his veins.

DUCCIO DI BUONINSEGNA.

WHILE I rejoiced, one afternoon of late,
In long-loved pictures lit with antique gold,
My thoughts, like someone cowering from the cold,
Began to whimper "What shall be your fate
When the clear world on such or such a date
Goes out, and you—as he whose hand of old
Made this that now your reverent eyes behold—
Lopped of your senses, try that subtler state?"

Thereat I dreamed of Duccio, long since dead;
Of how in old Siena, two by two,
The tapers passed: and in myself I said,
Measuring that tender spirit against my own,
"What then am I to make so much ado?
I shall but know what such a man has known."

KITTY.

"Days more glad than their flight was fleet."

WHEN, as the twilight came and the shops were lit
And women and men were hurrying home from toil,
I watched you enter the omnibus under the church
And the night and the noise of London gathered you in,
Were you as happy as I in your one-day's friend,
You laughter-lover, you fair affectionate girl?
For friends we were at a glance,—when a few hours back,
Painter and model, we parleyed there at the door:
And none was gladder in all the world than we
As, working hard in the brief October light,
I saw the Olympian beauty that brought you fame
And you, in the pride of praise, grew fairer still.
That was a joy for two, but you could not guess
How, having pushed to the waiting fire your throne
And set it with cakes and honey and tea-cups, I,
Gripped so long in the unseen traps of life,
There for the first time felt the deep-sunk pain

Of finding joy in another's youth,—as there
To hear that merry and irresponsible tale
Of students wild as the wind, and famous men,
And amorous Indian colonels, not to be quenched,
And all the once familiar talk of the Schools.
Now you are gone: and I, as I turn back home,
Thrill to the swift unravelling of twelve years.
For many a time as the lamps were lit in the streets
I left the school and again went out in the world,
A boy romantic, shy and younger than you,
And planning a thousand pictures, poems and plays
And eating, sleeping and breathing only for art.
What memories lull my soul,—like a lazy boat
That lies in a green backwater under the boughs!
I think of the frowning master, an iron man,
The touch of the bread that we used on a faulty curve,
The donkey-stools, the smell of the charcoal sticks;
And how in the mid-day pause, with pocketed lunch,
We sped to the great Museum and gloated long
Over the glories achieved in the olden times
Until we were dazed with beauty, and somewhat sad.
I think of the caricatures, the wrestling-rounds,
The unrehearsed processions, the choric songs;
And once again, with a gush of delight, can feel
The inexhaustible fervour with which I worked,

And how, if ever a spirit was lured by love
Back to a world yet warm with its after-glow,
I did not strive or rejoice or suffer alone,
For Dante Gabriel had me fast in a spell
Not to be loosed, I hope, till life go out.
Where are they now, I wonder,—the Spanish girl
Whose golden nudity dazzled my virgin eyes:
The men with their serried faces, all intent,
Of whom I thought, “Is it he, perhaps, or he,
The great high-priest of beauty for whom we wait?”
How have they fared, who then were confident boys?
I do not doubt there were some that lost their hope,
Some that fared well, some ill, and some that achieved
The wisely-counselling mind that is more than fame.
And wheresoever they be I would wish them well,
For though they marked me little and knew me less
Them I recall with joy. And though in the dusk
I wander delightedly back to my schooling-time,
I do not think of it now with a weak regret,
For well I know that nothing lovely endures
And nothing happy, but like the sun and the earth
Beauty and joy must either advance or die.

RETROSPECT.

THIRTY years gone, and not an empire sacked ?
Thirty good years, and not a cardinal killed ?
When I admit so much in the asphodels,
What will Baglione, what will Julian,
What Alexander, say ?

Even as a boy, indeed, I knew that such
Violent or splendid acts were not for me :
Yet, could I somehow face that earlier self—
Sure of quick honour, grave and confident—
What could I show him now.?

Plays that please few ; a slighted book that held
All the keen attar of adolescent thought ;
Glories of passion that drooped away in woe ;
These, and a slow-found, ever-widening
Wonder and joy to be.

Have I then failed ? How rawly tastes the word !
Who, though, shall grieve if this or that man fail ?
He that has once gone up the tower of time
Knows himself Man and all the marvellous
Tale of the world his own.

DREAMS.

THE GAME.

Boy. PRETTY one, pretty one, cover your eyes.

Girl. What will you do?

Boy. I will teach you a game.

Girl. Well, I have covered them. What can you see?

Boy. Two little fruits that are ripe for the mouth,
Ripe, and yet each of them tipped with a bud.

Girl. O you ridiculous darling!

Boy. And there,
Flying from one to the other, as though
Fancying which were the sweeter to choose,
Wavers a butterfly.

Girl. Over my breasts?

Boy. Over their whiteness the red of its wings . . .

Girl. Dear little butterfly!

Boy. Beautiful fruits!

Now if you will you may capture it . . .

Girl. Why,

Boy, it is you and the wings are your lips!

THE SHIP.

A WINDOW ledge, and a few toy-soldiers marching . . .
The boy looks up for a moment as though he listened,
As though the sea had called his name in a whisper.
And out on the sea-line, out on the fervent sea-line,
A bright ship moves,
Touching his life on its way from far Bermuda,
Touching his heart for ever with all romance.

THE MEADOW.

AND so across the green and glaring meadows
We moved, meandering like the stream beside us :
And they and I became entirely happy,
Being with all our most belov'd companions.
Lionel was there, Diana, Rosalind, Guido,
Richard, the Emperor Julian, Dante and Shelley,
And some who then were all as dear as these are
But now seem strange. And presently, though no one
Said anything, we dropped amidst the clover,
Listening delightedly while Guido started
To improvise a tale of joy and peril.

I gazed upon the stream, and as I listened
Began to long that we might live for ever—
So beautiful was the world, and we so happy :
And two kingfishers, threading the air with splendour,
Passed me.

At this, an overwhelming sorrow
Smoothed out the dream and, half awake, I lingered
Pent in my brain, and wondering "Were we wiser,
Should we desire that life might be less troubled?"—
For suddenly, with the impotent woe of childhood,
I had foreseen the immeasurable anguish
Of severing from a world that was all fair.

TALES.

DEATH AND THE DANCERS.

(DESIGN FOR A BALLET.)

OLD and sick, she was almost dead.
Damp were the pillows behind her head.
On a scarlet cloth which covered the bed

Her arms lay livid and lean.

"Where," said one, "will you deign to die?"
And cringeing low we began to sigh
As though for grief that her end was nigh.

"In the dancing-room," said the queen.
We drew her bed to the great black room.
We lighted candles to warm the gloom.
"What cruel sport will she make? Of whom?"

We whispered "What may it mean?"
Each of us feared that a frenzied whim
Might cause her malice to dart at him.

"At least," I pondered, "the lights are dim:
Perhaps I shall not be seen."

We saw her laugh. We could hear the creak
Of the guttering carcase, drained and weak:
And when, with a cough, she began to speak

Her voice was hard and thin.

"Whimper and whine no more," she said,

“ But summon the dancers, boy and maid.
Their marriages are too long delayed ”—

And she added a jest unclean.

The twelve young dancers, heavy at soul,
On tiptoes into the chamber stole,

“ Lo,—here,” said she, “ is a loving-bowl,

And a poison mixed therein !

You are maids and men. I am fain to see
How wild the lust of the flesh may be.

If any flag, they shall drink to me !

And so,—let the dance begin ! ”

Shivering, pale, with eyes half mad,

The girls went forward, each with a lad.

Three were nude and three were clad

In scales of silver and green.

“ Oh God ! ” we thought, “ they are lost ! ” For lo,
With curdled hate of their ruthless foe

They were footing a measure austere and slow

With a languid spiritless mien.

“ Show them the tongue of a whip,” she cried ;
And straightway one of us left her side.

With a knotted lash that was ripped from hide

He flicked at their tender skin.

“ Faster ! Faster ! ” they heard her call,

And the whip like a serpent sprang at them all.

Two of them staggered. I saw them fall,
And my sight began to spin.
Youth and maid, they were dragged in dread
To either side of the scarlet bed.
They drank. They fluttered. They dropped there dead
As wild birds caught in a gin.
Their fellows flung them a frightened glance
But dared not halt in the endless dance.
And now all numb, in a sickly trance,
I gazed at the ghastly scene.
They would not speed though they flinched for pain.
Never before had she willed in vain ;
And the sweat ran down her cheeks like rain.
Her ancient eyes grew keen.
Halfway out of the bed she rose ;
Her lips were open, and moved like those
Of a painted doll, but they could not close :
And the blood came up between.
And then her frame with a foolish leap
Collapsed. She lay in a huddled heap.
And one beside me began to weep.
“ She is dead,” he wailed,—“ the queen ! ”
There we stood for a moment, grown
Gaunt as figures of rigid stone,
Till another said in a dreamy tone

“That candle is burning high . . .”
At this, with a clamour of half insane
Delight, the dancers began again
But now to a rhythm rapid as rain

That bursts on a hot July.
With glad wild eyes and glittering hair
Hither and thither they swept. I swear
Their flashing bodies hung on the air.

And we, who were standing by,
Into the shrieking rout we ran,
And a revel, a glory of life, began
Such as was never beheld of man.

In truth, we could all but fly !
They sprang at the body. They propped her up
And, bowing and tittering, prayed her sup
As they closed her hand on the poison-cup,

Then dashed away with a cry.
At last they slackened, and one by one
Ran through the door to the rising sun,
Until in the hush of the dead was none

Remained of the quick but I.
There lay two she had killed. “No doubt
Her ghost,” I thought, “is groping about.”
And cold with fear I carried them out.

Under the flowers they lie.

THE ARTIST.

NOW, in that year of Jesu Christ our Lord
The duchess died, and not a soul knew how,
Some talked of strangling with a golden cord,
Some of wild roses wreathed upon her brow
With all the petals poisoned ; but the truth
I, the duke's secretary, will tell you now.
It was from him I learned it, in my youth.

A naked Venus, holding back the stars,
Ruled his midheaven without a check,—in sooth,
I cannot call to mind a feebler Mars :
And therefore was he vain, luxurious, mild,
A man of subtle taste and wayward heart
Who loved rich robes or gems like any child,
And flew, half mad, about the flame of art.

Teresa had a soul devout and pure,—
So colourless, indeed, that from the start
We knew his love of her could not endure.
And now they had been married just a year
When the duke, cloyed by such a doting wife,
Burned with a new keen love, as you shall hear,
And thus began the old familiar strife.

For in that June—to make my story short—
Passionate, beautiful, sweet with unspent life,
The lady Violante came to court :
And on a certain soundless afternoon
The duchess, in the upper garden, heard
Hot speech of love below the sun-flushed moon,
Saw their lips meet, and fled without a word.

July came, and a masque was given one night,
A tale of god and nymph and hope deferred,
Nor looked it ill, I own, by taper-light
With all things fashioned to the duke's own plan.
He had so keen a sense for hue and tone,
Nay, more, could tell—or so the rumour ran—
Silver from gold by finger-touch alone.

Now when the Duke Alessandro sought his bed,
Far in the chamber's dusk he heard a moan
And found Teresa sobbing, with bent head,
And wearing still her pearl-embroidered gown.
“*Why do you weep?*” said he. “*Can you not guess?*”
“*Well,*” the duke answered, pacing up and down,
“*For jealousy of Violante?*” “*Yes!*”

“*What do you wish?*” “*To make an end*” she cried,
And forth from the low bosom of her dress
Drew a thin dagger, flung the sheath aside,

Then waited, panting. For the duke stood still,
Smiled, and said "*Come! Give up this woman's game.*
You dare not do it." "*I will,*" she wailed "*I will!*"
Yet her soul feared, and down she sank in shame.

Thereafter she was watched, and word was brought
To Alessandro how she went and came.

"*Why, it were worse than sacrilege*" he thought

"*To let her gash that pretty bowl-like breast,—*

It is so white." But always, while he said

"*If she did that, my soul could never rest,*"

His heart was whispering "*Oh, that she were dead!*"

"*If it is fate . . .*" he mused; and through his mind

The poison of a hideous fancy spread,

So that, not knowing the deed which he designed,

Each midnight when the lanterns burned no more .

Three masked and velvet-shoed musicians crept

Into a room shut by a carven door

From that wherein the duchess tossed and wept.

And now one night, as gently as could be,

Teresa slid out, certain that he slept,

But the duke snatched her silken shift, and she

Half-crazy begged him on her knees for death;

And when he heard her cry "*It is my fate . . .*"

Duke Alessandro, scarce above his breath,

Answered "*Be still. You shall die sweetly. Wait!*"

Forth from a cupboard in the wall, well-stored
With eastern drugs for troublers of the state
And pictured with the likeness of Our Lord,
He drew a phial; and passing to the door
Said to the three musicians "*When you hear
This that I hold fall shattered to the floor,
Play!*" And he left them fumbling in their fear,

And going to the window set it wide
And broke and took a dark rose growing near.
Above the vineyards and the roofs outside
Shone the great August moon. Then back he came
And gathered from a coffer painted red
A gorgeous coverlet many-hued like flame,
The which he lay with care across the bed.

Teresa watched him moving here and there.
In sooth, she had no power to turn her head.
She saw him lift a glass of Venice ware
And very slowly brim it. Then she laughed,
Cried "*Is it swift?*" and straight began to weep.
"*Sudden and swift*" he told her, but the draught
Held, as he knew, a soft long death like sleep.

He put the glass aside; caught up his wife
And laid her on the gold and crimson heap;
Ripped off her raiment with his hunting-knife,

And covered her white form from feet to brow
With delicate kisses like a silken net:
But ever when she moaned "*Give it me now!*"
Smoothing her limbs he smiled and said "*Not yet.*"

Why did he wait? Perhaps about his heart
Blew memories of the night on which they met;
And thinking this might be, with unskilled art
She called him by a little foolish name
Long out of use. It hurt him like a bow
That jars along the string, and half in shame
He bit the core of sweetness long ago.

But ever toward the window-square he gazed,
And noted how the moon was coming low,
Until at last in at the room it blazed
Full-stream upon the bed, with such a light,
With such a brilliance, that Teresa shrank.
Then the duke rose and murmuring "*Now,—good-night!*"
Gave her the poison, trembling: and she drank.

He flung the glass to fragments. At the sign
A ceremonial music rose and sank,
Dizzying their senses like Arabian wine;
And Alessandro whispered at her feet
"*Oh, you are lovelier than the blinding moon!*"

Is it not sweet to die ? Is it not sweet ? ”

And while he spoke her soul began to swoon.

Like one far-off who sees a swimmer drown,
He watched the life that should be gone so soon
Stir in her limbs and gradually droop down
Until he knew not if she lived or no,
And taking the full rose from out his breast
Over her brow he drew it to and fro,
And said “ *Poor suffering spirit,—be at rest !* ”

He strained to see her loosening soul escape.
Her breath went out. She died there, unconfessed,
While the slow shadows covered up her shape
As inch by inch the falling moon withdrew.
The duke stood up. “ *These for thy soul !* ” he cried,
Scattering the roseleaves over her like dew :
And there, till dawn, lay listening at her side.

I was young then : unwise and young was he,
And long ago in dread of hell he died.
For the which cause, good Christian though I be,
I will not scourge his memory for that sin,
But leave it unto God ; and if God please
One day shall heaven relent, and let him in.
Now, of our wars against the Sienese

VALE.

NO city now, as in the statelier past,
Moving toward the hills or by the foam,
With flowers and torches and obsequial chant
Honours her dead, nor renders for their sake
The living scene a pageant more august.
If I, then, opening silence, pour for him
This newly-trodden wine of measured words—
That now he cannot hear who many a time
Shared with me, once,
The vintage verse of England's earlier days—
It is that we by words, and words alone,
May fledge our grief with beauty and, thereby
Mounting those unfamiliar heights within
At which we are eternal, breathe one air
With spirits winged by death.

He young and dead, I young and living yet . . .
It was not so
That in those twilights of July we two,
Pacing my father's orchard, with our fresh
And dauntless minds grappling the world's debate,
Thought by this hour to be ;
But greed and envy, like a prairie fire,
Long smouldering among the nations, caught the wind,

Licked up mankind, and left a blackened world :
And he, not thinking once
That death should come to him with tigerish eyes,
Was—with what myriads more—abruptly dashed
Over the ledge of life and past the sun.
For him who showed himself
Nobler than most and yet a match for all
I make no lax melodious lament,
Nor grudge for him the lot that once befell
Dante, Aurelius, Julian, Socrates
And all that ever filed
Through the world's cave and saw its roof of stars.
Not dimmed by age, he knows what all our years
We hungered thus to know and strove to learn,
Since they that would steer well must find the north,
And if he knows and I remain to strive
How, though I loved him, should I mourn his fate ?
But none the less
Not at so tense a time, when once again
I stare across the intervening sea,
Can I compound with truth
Or drug my intellect with flattering dreams.
I too, like others, ill-content to guess,
Had put the question by, and lived at ease,
But that the world is like that homely room

Where men, perturbed by stories of Peru,
Clustered about a board, and spread out maps
That were but drawn from fancies or report,
And clamoured "Here it lies" or "There" or "Here"
Or that Peru was all a traveller's tale,
And I, like grim Pizarro, staking all
On that which none may prove.
How, of their many charts, to choose aright?
Can it be verily, as a remnant few
Say, smiling, that the soul is its own myth?
Can he be nothing? Had he then no sun
That held his thoughts and senses and desires,
Like temporal moons and planets, round itself?
Or in those boyish days did he and I
Judge with a clearer sight
Than they who from the dead leaf doubt the sap?
If it be so indeed,
Now is that spirit pursuing truth and joy
Through some resplendent archetypal world
Of which in solid shapes we touch the shell,—
A protean world of titan mountain-peaks,
Of golden seas, and caverns lit with flowers,
And woods that sing, and beings old as earth:
And still shall go and come
Upon the soundless tide of birth and death

From that world and to this for age on age,
And some day he and I give hail anew
As even now
I dream with eager heart and more than hope,—
More than frail hope, for though the mind of man
Be smothered up in webs of self-deceit
And ever spinning more and ever more
To blur away the truth it would not see,
Knowing how much I loved him and how hot
Would be my shame now to make toys of thought,
I know that if I erred—
There in that depth which from myself is hid—
I should be dumb'd by anguish of such loss,
And that if now I speak
It is that even the unknown deeps are still.

There is a certain midway hour in life
That startles every man, when the tide turns
And, wave on wave, we hear death coming in.
Then must we neither flinch nor, after, flag,
But—living to grow wise,
To gaze upon ourselves until we feel
A wonder there outspanning death and life,
And sorrowing not that all things flow and change—
Move among men and work through memoried years
With stoic heart and unapparent grief.

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